

# THE MURDERER WHO LAUGHED.



By Albert Sonnichsen, Able Seaman.

**M**EN who do not value the lives of others often value their own highly enough. But this rule seldom works the other way. The reckless, daredevil vagabond who butts about the world into all sorts of dangers and acquires a sort of contempt of the various forms of death he often faces, begins after awhile to believe that every one else shares his attitude of mind toward what he considers at the worst only a slight hastening of the inevitable.

Such a man is the average sailor. He has no family, and his more distant kindred are only vague personalities of whom he has only a vague knowledge. It is family ties that cause men to fear death.

If half his shipmates are washed overboard in a storm, Jack is depressed for the time being, but a month later, when he reaches port, he is quite apt to give his account of the incident in a humorous vein.

"Ye'd a larfed," he says, in the course of his tale, "if ye'd a seen the way Tim Hogan was a hangin' on to the end of a topsail brace, like a blessed herrin' hooked on the end of a line. Then, when he couldn't hold on no longer, he just gives a tremendous wriggle, like he'd swallowed the bar, an' it was tasin' pretty good, an' off he swims like he was lookin' for more, an' that was the last we sees of Bill."

As a matter of fact, Jack did not laugh at the time of the accident. His comparison of a drowning man clinging to the end of a rope to a hooked fish never entered his head until he spun his yarn. Time has given him that attitude toward a form of death so common that it may be his any day. When his turn comes, he will not laugh, but if his ghost survives him it will probably give an account to the other ghosts of its entrance into the spirit world in an equally humorous vein.

If you were to consult the log of the American bark Southern Cross about eight years back you would come across an entry like this:

"Chief Mate Hardy disappeared in the middle watch. Supposed to have fallen overboard while examining the log."

Such an entry is common in ships' logs, and it might not excite much interest in the average shore-abiding citizen, but in the maritime world there are some to whom this would recall memories of a strange personality—Happy Steve.

How Happy Steve was connected with the drowning of the mate of the Southern Cross will develop in a continuous manner, but let me say a few words of the mate.

I will hide Dick Hardy's identity under his real name; nobody but a few ship owners know him by that. He has an aged mother living somewhere up in Maine, and for her sake it is better to let his past rest. Let it suffice to say that under an alias something, but not quite, like Black Jack, he was known the world over as one of the blackest scoundrels that ever trod a deck. You could hear tales of his heroic brutalities from Frisco to Calcutta. In his day boarding masters had to drug sailors before they could ship them on the Southern Cross—she was a hard packet. Today, I believe, she is reckoned one of the most comfortable in the American merchant marine.

It was aboard the ship that I made my first trip to sea that I first heard of Hardy, and while I have listened to innumerable tales of him since, and have even related some of his exploits myself, that introductory knowledge of him will always remain with me as a distinct impression. For I was present when the first authentic account of his death was given out by the one man who knew.

This was aboard the old Nicaraguan bark Don Adolfo. She had aboard a crew of hardy, reckless west coast adventurers, most of whom were on the west coast because it was not particularly healthy for them to be anywhere else. Not that they were really a bad lot, but, as I have already said, they were of that class who had acquired an attitude toward human life not compatible with the laws of more civilized parts.

One of the men was a chap called Happy Steve. It was his optimistic temperament that had given him his name. Come what would, hard weather, topsails to reef, a leaky ship to pump, or, in fine weather, decks to hoist, Steve always accepted these hardships with a jolly smile, while his shipmates looked back and swore. Steve could swear, too, but he did it in such a humorous way that the foul words on his lips lost their worst significance. Even when he had a growl with the captain it usually ended with the captain laughing and granting the demand.

Usually an optimist, it was a favorite in a ship's forecastle, but Steve could give everything such a humorous turn that his shipmates would laugh in spite of themselves. During the second dog watch he kept the men in a continuous roar of laughter with his tales of past exploits. Happy Steve told man stories, but there was one that beat them all.

We had passed the doldrums and were well down into the southeast trades, where the steady breeze made it seldom necessary to pull a rope or to touch a sail. In that respect it was almost like steamboating. Our dog watches were never disturbed, and every man's artistic ability as a storyteller was in full demand.

One evening the conversation turned to hard-case Yankee packets, of ships where men take and give blows with deadly intent. Each man told of the

bucko mates he had known, and as almost every one had known Dick Hardy, or Black Jack, he and his mysterious fate became the principal subject for discussion.

"He was a bad 'un," commented Kanaka Joe, darkly; "blessed if he weren't. I've known hard-case mates, but most of 'em was on the square in a fight. Black Jack weren't; he was a mucker; he'd hit a man when he was down."

"You bet," agreed another man; "drawn in was too good for him. He should a been ham-strung first, then hung by his arms in the main chains, an' then biled in a pot o' tar."

Here each man gave his idea of a fitting end for Black Jack, and some were quite ingenious. That is, all did so except Happy Steve—he only laughed immoderately as each man presented his method.

"Come, Steve," said Kanaka Joe, "how would you have him cooked?" Steve laughed uproariously, while his mates grinned in anticipation of a particularly funny account of an imaginary death for Black Jack. But Steve's laughter increased; his face was red with suppressed merriment.

"Come, Steve," said a Cockney sailor, encouragingly, "let's ave the joke; don't be a-keepin' it all to yerself." "Why, ye blessed galoots," chortled Steve at last, "I could tell ye a story of Black Jack as would make yer eyes water. Here you chaps is a talkin' of Black Jack, with me here as could tell ye more about him than any man livin'." And Steve shook with keen appreciation of the humor of it.

"Well, ye blasted ass, why don't ye tell us?" suggested the Cockney.

"Well," panted Steve, between spasms, "seem as how I am with a crowd as can appreciate the funny side of a good story, I am goin' to oblige ye."

"Ye see, fellers, I was bos'n's mate of the Southern Cross the trip Black Jack croaked." "Well, I be hanged!" ejaculated several of the men together. Steve chuckled at their astonishment in their faces. "You bet," he continued, "an' I am the boy as can tell ye a few things about that trip."

"We left Liverpool for Frisco with general cargo an' a crowd o' green Cockneys aboard as didn't know the spanker beam together, marlin' spike. Naturally, Black Jack piled into 'em before we got clear of Ushant Light, an' the scuppers was red with blood right an' day."

"Well, about five days out, we struck a bit of nasty weather, an' one night all hands was aloft reefin' the fore upper topsail. Black Jack was up there in the bunt lookin' arter the job. It so happened as I was next to him, but he didn't know it was me. Well, something happened to rile him, and first thing I know he landed on my jaw an' nearly sent me down the deck. Fancy him takin' me for a blasted limejuicer."

Steve stopped for a moment to thoroughly enjoy Jack's mistake.

"Well," he continued, "when his laughter had subsided, 'when we got down I told him as how he had hit me by mistake. But, blast me, he didn't see the joke."

"Good for ye," sez he.

"Well, naturally, that kind o' riled me, bein' taken for a bloomin' greenhorn, an' I told Black Jack right then as how I'd fix him in Frisco. Upon which he fetches me an upper-cut that sends me down to leeward into the scuppers."

"Well, things went along that way until we got down into the trades, an' one night a funny idea struck me as I was a-pacin' the deck. Ye remember, Black Jack was bow-legged, an' I was larfin' to myself wonderin' how he'd look swimmin' with them bow legs. Ever see a bow-legged man swim? Funniest thing yet. But Black Jack was the bow-leggedest man ye ever see."

"That idea stuck to me for a long time an' whenever I'd think of it,

night or day, I'd larf, so I went an' hankerin' to see Black Jack swim with them bow legs o' his a-waggin' behind."

"One night in the middle watch, the chap at the wheel wanted to be relieved a few minutes, so I went and took the wheel while he went for'd. Black Jack was pacin' the poop slowly, it bein' a sultry night. Pretty soon he goes up to the weather rail and leans agin it, kind o' sleepy."

"Well, fellers those legs o' his never looked so bowed as they did then. I could already fancy him kickin' them out as he was swimmin'. The more

I thought, the stronger that idea got. Thinks I to myself, 'Here's a man wot makes the world all the worse for bein' in it; why not give him a boost into the better world?' An' I thinks o' the easy times wot would come to the poor chaps for'd wot he had lamed o' every one. And I thinks o' when he smashed me, too. But most of all, I wanted to see a bow-legged man swim. Say, you fellers don't know what a good larf is till ye see a bow-legged man swim. I've seen it once."

Here Steve broke off his narrative to chuckle over funny memories.

"Well," he resumed, "at last I couldn't stand it any longer. There was Black Jack leanin' over the rail, an' there was me, dyin' to see him swim. So I steadies the helm pretty good, an' then kicks off my slippers, easy like, so's he couldn't hear. An' then I leaves the wheel, softly, an' creeps up to the weather rail, an' so help me, there was Black Jack a noozin'! Yessir, 'sleepin' on his watch. Him, as would lam a poor feller from for'd near dead for doin' that same thing. Wot yer think o' that?"

"He was leanin' over pretty far, holdin' on to a awning stanchion. Wot yer think I did? Ye'd never guess. The canvass draw bucket was layin' on the skylight, an' it looked so much like a cork helmet I couldn't help wonderin' how it would fit Black Jack's pear-shaped head. So I sneaked over to the skylight an' cut off the rope. Then I tried it on my head, an' it was just a trifle too big. But, thinks I, it'll jest fit Black Jack, a tight fit, too, so's he couldn't get it off. I took it up with his heels, as the chap on the 'Nancy Bell' would a said, an' over he went, with the draw bucket stuck fast an' a-smotherin' his squeals."

The humor of the situation—ghastly humor, perhaps—so struck all hands, due more to Steve's manner than to his words, that all burst out into a long guffaw. The idea of Black Jack diving to his death with a draw bucket over his head seemed ridiculously funny.

"Well, fellers," said Steve, after he had wiped the tears from his own eyes, "the ship was goin' a bare three knots, an' the moon was out. I could see the white foam spot where he went down, an' aft I runs to the log line an' watch. Well, ye believe me—but it's true—all of a sudden I see that white canvass draw bucket pop up yith his two arms wavin' on each side o' it. An' a-waggin' behind, like crab's nippers. Oh, say, fellers—"

Again Steve went off into peals of merriment. Finally he was able to resume.

"Well, boys, I jest leaned over the rail an' larfed fit to bust myself. The way he was tryin' to holler through that draw bucket an' couldn't would a given ye fits if ye'd a heard the way he was a ripplin' up inside. I kinder reckon the cuss words he was lettin' out weighed the bucket down, an' them, with the iron band, sent him nose down. Larst I see was his two bow legs a kickin' up in the air, an' then I went back to the wheel."

"When the chap came back to relieve me I didn't say nothin', but pretty soon the third mate misses Black Jack, an' calls the skipper. The ol' man comes on deck, and we squares in our yards an' sails back over our course, burnin' blue lights and shoutin' like 'ell; an' I was shoutin' louder 'an any of 'em, but ye bet they didn't see no signs of Black Jack with his head in the draw bucket."

"Say fellers, wot ye suppose old Nick said when he saw Black Jack comin' up the gates of hell with that draw bucket over his head? Blessed if I wouldn't a ben willin' to stand the high temperature for a few minutes jest to see what happened."

The idea seemed so humorous to Happy Steve that the story ended in a long, hearty laugh, interpolated by humorous comments on an imaginary conversation between his Satanio Majesty and Black Jack, with the draw bucket presenting difficulties in the way of mutual recognition.

Happy Steve often again referred to the murder he had committed, and each time he sprinkled his story with hearty laughter.

When we arrived in Australia Happy Steve cleared out for the Swan river gold diggings. Later, we heard that he met his finish there, but he died as he lived—in a humorous way. The account we had stated that he had cracked some joke up there that wasn't appreciated by the English miners, and that it precipitated in a shooting scrape. When the smoke cleared away three of Steve's opponents were stretched out, but he himself had cracked his last joke. When told that his American humor had not been understood, he chuckled immoderately and then died. The account may not be exactly true, but it was characteristic of him.

Some years later I met a man who had been on the "Southern Cross" on that same eventful trip, and when I asked him who was bos'n's mate at the time, he replied:

"Why, a humorous sort o' chap—a feller called Steve White."

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